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Talking Tough

By HEDRICK SMITH

WASHINGTON — WITH Congress preoccupied by budget deficits and the plight of the farmer, the Reagan Administration suddenly thrust Central America onto center stage last week with a series of attacks on the Sandinista Government of Nicaragua. In a campaign of escalating polemics aimed at generating pressure on Congress to resume aid to Nicaraguan rebels, President Reagan and Secretary of State George P. Shultz made four major declarations in seven days. So strongly did they challenge the legitimacy of the Nicaraguan Government that some influential members of Congress wondered if this could be a prelude to a diplomatic break with Managua. Some Administration officials said the aim was to avoid a situation that could force a break.

The President set the theme in his Saturday radio broadcast last weekend by comparing American aid to Nicaraguan "freedom-fighters" to what foreign heroes like Lafayette had done for the American Revolution. On Tuesday, Mr. Shultz told the House Foreign Affairs Committee that Nicaragua was slipping "behind the Iron Curtain" and asserted: "We have a moral duty to help people trying to bring about the freedom of their country." Later in a speech in San Francisco, he raised the possibility of direct American action if Nicaragua was allowed to fall into "the endless darkness of Communist tyranny."

The high point came Thursday night at Mr. Reagan's news conference, the first of his second term. In several rapid-fire exchanges, Mr. Reagan all but said he wanted the Nicaraguan Government overthrown, though he avoided those specific words. Asked if his goal was to remove that Government, he replied: "Well, remove it in the sense of its present structure, in which it is a Communist totalitarian state, and it is not a Government chosen by the people." Asked if that wasn't tantamount to seeking its overthrow, the President hedged: "Not if the present Government would turn around and say all right, if they say, 'uncle,' and invite Nicaraguan rebels into the Government."

His attack was harsh. "I don't think the Sandinistas have a decent leg to stand on," he declared. "What they have done is totalitarian. It is brutal, cruel." In Nicaragua, there is close to one-party rule as well as press censorship, hounding of opponents, police informers, harassment of the Catholic Church and a heavy-handed army draft. But with considerable private enterprise, some opposition parties and labor unions operating modestly, and outspoken church and business leaders criticizing the Sandinistas, it is still well short of Soviet totalitarianism. The President also ignored the Nicaraguan elections last Nov. 4. The most prominent opposition leaders refused to participate because of campaign restrictions; even so, smaller parties managed to win nearly one-third of the seats in the National Assembly.

Democratic critics in Congress contended that the latest statements showed the Administration's true colors. "There's no longer any pretense that what we're trying to do is interdict arms to Salvadoran leftists or pressure the Sandinistas into a more malleable negotiating position," said Representative Michael Barnes, an influential Maryland Democrat. "I think we got a glimpse of the reality of Ronald Reagan, his demoniacal view of the Sandinistas and the extent to which he sees them as the Central American outpost of the evil em-

pire," asserted Representative Stephen Solarz, a Brooklyn Democrat. "I think it was a virtual declaration of war against Nicaragua."

From the White House perspective, the Reagan-Shultz offensive was a deliberate effort to go over the heads of such Congressional critics and draw the line on Nicaraguan policy for the electorate, casting the alternatives in stark terms. The members of Congress, said a high official, "will have to stand up and be counted — they will have to say whether they back the democratic forces fighting against the Sandinistas or are willing to just let things develop and see the consolidation of a Marxist-Leninist regime there, serving as a base for the Soviets and Cubans on this continent."

But well-placed Republican Senate aides say the tougher line also reflects an internal battle over the di-

rection-of policy. According to one aide, some national security officials have been pressing for the United States to drop its diplomatic recognition of the Sandinista Government and to grant political recognition and open aid to rebel forces. At his news conference, Mr. Reagan laid out the rationale for such a move. He charged that the Sandinistas had betrayed the 1979 revolution that overthrew Anastasio Somoza Debayle and gone back on their promise of free elections and democratic rule.

American policy, he said, was to help those ousted from the old revolutionary coalition by the Sandinistas and give them "a chance to have that democracy that they fought for." For some officials, that would justify recognizing people like Eden Pastora Gomez, formerly a Sandinista leader and now head of a rebel group known as the Democratic Revolutionary Alliance. But the Nica-

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raguan Embassy here sought to discredit the largest rebel group, the Nicaraguan Democratic Front, by charging that it included some leaders drawn from Somoza's National Guard. The immediate rebuttal from Mr. Shultz was that "most of the leaders fought in the revolution against Somoza."

Influential Republican Senators like Richard Lugar, the Foreign Relations Committee Chairman, and David Durenburger, the Intelligence Committee Chairman, have urged the Administration to stop trying to get Congress to provide \$14 million in covert aid through the Central Intelligence Agency and provide it openly. But so far, the President's top policy advisers, especially William J. Casey, the Director of Central Intelligence, are reported to be adamantly opposed. Some fear that if aid became open, Congress would invoke the War Powers Act, inviting new controversies. At week's end, Administration officials were asserting they envisioned no change in policy.

Congress also appears to be standing pat. Three times the House of Representatives has voted against aid to the Nicaraguan rebels, killing the program last year, and Democratic leaders contend they have the votes to block the new drive.

In the Senate, Senators Lugar and Durenburger share the Administration's overall goals but have warned the White House it lacks the votes in the Senate Intelligence Committee to revive the program.

The running fight with Nicaragua

July 19, 1979. President Anastasio Somoza Debayle ousted by the Sandinist National Liberation Front, ending 42 years of Somoza family rule.

March 18, 1981. Secretary of State Alexander M. Haig Jr. says Nicaragua is first on a Soviet "hit list" for domination in Central America.

April 1, 1981. U.S. cuts off aid, saying arms destined for El Salvador rebels are funneled through Nicaragua.

March 9, 1982. C.I.A. aerial photographs said to show major military construction done with Cuban and Soviet aid.

March 10, 1982. News leaks out of planned covert aid by C.I.A. to Nicaraguan opposition groups.

March 15, 1982. Sandinistas declare state of emergency, saying they fear U.S. invasion.

May 4, 1983. President Reagan calls Nicaraguan rebels "freedom fighters."

June 6, 1983. Nicaragua expels three American diplomats, accusing them of a "macabre plot" to kill the Foreign Minister.

June 7, 1983. U.S. closes all six Nicaraguan consulates in this country and expels 21 consular officials.

Jan. 11, 1984. U.S. Army helicopter pilot killed during routine military maneuvers in Honduras, by gunfire from across the Nicaraguan border.

Jan. 11, 1984. Kissinger report on Central America strongly endorses Administration policies.

Feb. 25 - March 30, 1984. Seven ships damaged in Nicaraguan harbors by mines that U.S. planted.

April 9, 1984. Nicaragua sues U.S. in World Court.

June 1, 1984. Secretary of State George P. Shultz meets with Daniel Ortega Saavedra, coordinator of Nicaraguan junta, in Managua.

June 25, 1984. Senate votes to drop covert aid to "contras," the anti-Sandinista guerrillas.

Oct. 14, 1984. Press reports existence of C.I.A. "primer" for terrorists; which advocates "neutralizing" political enemies.

Nov. 4, 1984. Mr. Ortega elected president with 67 percent of the vote. U.S. denounces election as a "Soviet-style sham."

Nov. 6, 1984. U.S. says Nicaragua has received Soviet attack helicopters, and that a shipment of Soviet fighter jets is headed for the country. Nicaragua denies this.

Jan 18, 1985. U.S. walks out of World Court.